Why Hamas Attacked When It Did

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Audio Brief

Description: A short, spoken-word summary from CSIS's Dan Byman on his commentary with Mackenzie Holtz, "Why Hamas Attacked When It Did."

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The Hamas attacks on Israel on October 7, 2023, were by far the most deadly terrorist attack in the country's history, and the resulting war is one of the most devastating to Palestinians, with over 15,000 dead so far, a number that will surely rise further as Israel tries to destroy Hamas completely. Why did Hamas attack when it knew that the consequences for it and the Palestinian people

would be so deadly? From the statements of Hamas leaders, reporting drawing on documents captured from Hamas fighters, and Hamas's long track record, some answers can be gleaned.

One of Hamas's goals was simply to kill Israelis—many of them. The *Washington Post* reported that instructions found on dead Hamas fighters included, "Kill as many people and take as many hostages as possible." Among other weapons, Hamas also equipped its fighters with thermobaric grenades, which can quickly cause massive fires in a home. The fighters also had enough ammunition and food to keep going into Israel if they were able to do so, as well as maps, suggesting an even higher death toll was possible.

Indeed, part of what Hamas wanted involved revenge for what it saw as past Israeli attacks and the constant Israeli occupation of the West Bank, arrest of Hamas leaders, isolation, and bombing of Gaza. Until October 7, most Israelis could live their lives believing that Hamas's situation and that of other Palestinians mattered little to them on a day-to-day basis. No longer.

Yet Hamas's hatred of Israel is a constant, and it does not explain Hamas's decision to strike on October 7 and not before. Part of the explanation may be that what Hamas saw as its gestures toward moderation before the October 7 attacks brought it few rewards. Hamas publicly rebranded in 2017, releasing an updated charter in which the group signaled its acceptance of a two-state solution as an appropriate temporary measure. The charter still contained many hateful and bellicose components, but it was a change from the group's 1988 founding statement, which fundamentally rejected any accommodation with Israel.

Some Israelis and outside analysts had come to believe that serving as Gaza's governing body for nearly two decades had moderated the group's stance on the conflict and resistance to Israel, with the group accepting that a massive assault would be counterproductive. On the surface, at least, Hamas seemed to back up this perceived change with actions. Before October 7, the group not only limited its own rocket attacks on Israel but also publicly punished those who instigated attacks within Gaza to break the fragile ceasefires. Hamas has let the Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ) fight Israel alone, not joining the fray between Israel and the

PIJ in August 2022 or in May 2023.

Was this strategy just a front while the group planned the October 7 attack? Perhaps. But Israel and the international community did not make a major shift in their policies in response to Hamas's moderation. There were limited economic concessions and statements acknowledging Hamas's role in governing Gaza. At the same time, there was incendiary far-right political rhetoric and rising levels of violence against Palestinians. Both 2021 and 2022 set records as the deadliest years for Palestinians, as the Netanyahu government green-lit the expansion of settlements in the West Bank and settlers themselves conducted pogroms against Palestinians.

The Israeli government also made clear its disdain for Hamas. Israeli prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu ripped up Hamas's revised charter in front of the camera, advocated for the defunding of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees (UNRWA), and gave a platform to far-right ideologues such as Bezalel Smotrich. This lack of incentives for moderation probably increased the attraction of a large-scale attack. This reality was reflected in Hamas official Basem Naim's interview after the October 7 attack, where he stated "We knew there was going to be a violent reaction. . . . But we didn't choose this road while having other options. We have no options."

Hamas leaders may have believed they were losing popular support in Gaza. Since the implementation of a semipermanent siege on Gaza in 2007, Israel has controlled much of the electricity, food, and water to the enclave. Gaza has spent half of its day without power since 2019, with a sustained gap in electricity supply. Gaza has also suffered from chronic water shortages, with its outdated or destroyed water infrastructure, 97 percent of the water in Gazan homes is unfit to drink. The economic situation is equally dire, with over 70 percent of families in Gaza dependent on NGO and international aid for their basic needs. Unable to guarantee basic necessities for its citizens, let alone dent the consistent 45 percent unemployment rate in Gaza, Hamas lacks ability to maintain its popular support through government services and improved quality of life.

On the other side of Hamas's claims to legitimacy, the presence of groups like the Palestinian Islamic Jihad in Gaza, which continue the fight, raised the question

Hamas's credibility as an Islamist resistance organization. With dropping public support, and without a path to improve or maintain their image in Gaza through governance, Hamas instead attempted to amplify its revolutionary credentials, both among Palestinians and globally, by carrying out a large-scale attack.

Hamas probably hoped to exploit Israel's response to increase its popularity. Khaled Mashal, one of its political leaders, noted, "We know very well the consequences of our operation on October 7 . . . No nation is liberated without sacrifices." Another Hamas leader noted two weeks after the attacks, "We are called a nation of martyrs, and we are proud to sacrifice martyrs."

Using a state's heavy-handed response against it is a classic insurgent tactic: many Gazans might not like Hamas, but when confronted with a choice between supporting the group or endorsing Israeli military operations, they will rally to its cause. Hamas in the past has shown its willingness to have Gazans suffer to advance its interests, and it colocates its military assets next to hospitals, schools, and mosques, including placing a command node under one of Gaza's biggest hospitals, according to a U.S. official. When civilian infrastructure is destroyed and thousands of Gazans killed, Hamas's resulting message is one of Israeli barbarity, not its own culpability.

If Hamas increased its own credibility, it also undermined that of its rival, the Palestinian Authority (PA), which rules on the West Bank. The PA leader, Mahmoud Abbas, has long favored negotiation and cooperation with Israel, a position already strained before October 7 but now even more discredited as Palestinians view the devastating Israeli response. This bolsters Hamas's claim to be the leader of the Palestinian national movement not just in Gaza but also in the West Bank and among the Palestinian diaspora. Indeed, Abbas is an 88-year old chain smoker in poor health, and his succession may be contested: there is no clear replacement. Hamas is bolstering its credentials at a time when rival leaders are in disarray.

Hamas also seeks to change the regional environment, as does its sponsor Iran. Tehran funds, arms, and trains Hamas, although Iran's responsibility for the specifics of October 7 are unclear. Before the attacks, the region was abuzz with the possibility of an Israeli-Saudi normalization, and Iran's support for the Syrian

regime's brutalization of its own people had discredited it among many Arabs. Now normalization is off the table, perhaps for good, and the region is focusing on Israel, not on the Syrian civil war. Instead of Iran being isolated in the Arab world, Arab publics at least admire its firm stance against Israel and support for Palestinian resistance. For both Hamas and Iran, having the focus be on Israeli attacks on Palestinians, not on the Syrian civil war or Israeli normalization, is a win for their cause.

Will Hamas achieve its objectives? The regional discourse has already changed in the group's favor, and for now its credibility is restored among many Palestinians. Hamas, however, has rolled the dice. Israeli operations, both present and future, are a threat to the group's leadership and control of Gaza. And even if Hamas proves successful, the Palestinian people are paying a massive price.

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